

# Captain Sam Bellamy and the *Whydah*: The Fateful Decisions that Brought Spanish 1715-Fleet Treasure to the Shores of Cape Cod

by Daniel Frank Sedwick

Born in England in 1689, Samuel Bellamy became a sailor early in life and fought for the Royal Navy during Queen Anne's War (War of Spanish Succession). Like so many other sailors, he was at loose ends after the war, so he decided to go to Cape Cod, probably to seek employment, in the spring of 1715. In July of that same year, the Spanish lost an immeasurable fortune in the 1715 Fleet disaster, wherein many thousands of coins and ingots from Mexico, Peru and Colombia went to the reefs and shores of eastern Florida in a hurricane. Such news was irresistible to an unemployed but experienced sailor like Bellamy, who soon formed a group of fellow adventurers to seek their fortunes chasing the treasures of the 1715 Fleet. This was his Fateful Decision #1.

After the sinking of the Spanish 1715 Fleet on July 31, the survivors sent longboats to St. Augustine and Havana to obtain relief. Just two weeks later the Spanish launched a rescue and salvage operation that continued into the year 1718. Without proper defenses, however, the salvage sites were sitting ducks for fortune-seekers, and news quickly spread to the two biggest Caribbean privateers of that time, Henry Jennings of Jamaica and Benjamin Hornigold of the Bahamas. It was not long before both of these famous pirates met Sam Bellamy.

Bellamy, along with his chief financial backer and second-in-command, the New Englander Paulsgrave Williams, arrived on the east coast of Florida to find that the Spanish had already begun salvage work and the treasure was not simply there for the taking as they had thought. The easy stuff was already salvaged by the Spaniards and being guarded onshore. Enter the pirates: After the news reached Jamaica in November, the English privateers Henry Jennings and John Wills sped to Florida and raided the salvage camps to come away with a reported 120,000 pesos in treasure. This vast fortune caused quite a stir back in Jamaica and launched a political battle between England and Spain that in effect gave rise to unabashed piracy based in the Bahamas, where eventually the King had no choice but to grant a general pardon in 1718 for any pirates who turned themselves in.

Sam Bellamy, meanwhile, faced having to return to New England empty-handed and answer to the investors who financed his salvaging venture, or instead turn to piracy. This was his Fateful Decision #2, and it brought him and his men to the Central American coast, where they exchanged their salvage vessel for two smaller and much faster boats known as *periaguas* (like huge canoes but capable of handling the seas). For several months they plundered ships off the Mosquito Coast, adding to their crew along the way. While heading to the better target of Cuba, Bellamy encountered the likes of Henry Jennings, fresh off his return to Jamaica with the 1715-Fleet loot. The timing was right for this veteran privateer to become Bellamy's first pirate mentor. Together they attacked Baya Hondo, on the north coast of Cuba, on April 3, 1716, overpowering a French ship and taking its 28,500-peso windfall in the form of what were no doubt 1715-Fleet coins, which the Spanish in Cuba had just traded for illicit goods from the French. Word of another rich French vessel to the east attracted Jennings' attention, although his scouts soon found that his rival Benjamin Hornigold had beaten him to it. The over-confident Jennings decided to go after Hornigold, and in a severe lapse of judgment, he left Bellamy with the loot in Baya Hondo. Now known as "Black Sam," Bellamy took the treasure and ran, which was his Fateful Decision #3.

Jennings did not find Hornigold, but somehow Bellamy did, with a different purpose. Hornigold was not just famous for privateering but also for mentoring other buccaneers, most prominently Edward Teach, better known as "Blackbeard," who was Hornigold's second-in-command by the time they met Bellamy. Hornigold loved the fact that Bellamy had tricked Jennings, and he gave his new student the sloop *Marianne*. Throughout the summer of 1716, the pirate flotilla carried out successful raids, but increasingly the pirates grew tired of Hornigold's policy of not taking British ships or cargo. During a careening stop, it was decided that Black Sam Bellamy would be the new master, and Hornigold, along with his protégé Blackbeard, was sent packing. (As a side note, Hornigold soon retired from piracy, taking advantage of the aforementioned pardon in the Bahamas in 1718, while Blackbeard continued his adventures in one of his prizes, which he named *Queen Anne's Revenge*, later lost off the coast of North Carolina in 1718, and was killed by the British Navy in November of that same year.)



Bellamy, still in the *Marianne*, proceeded to ransack the Caribbean, taking over 50 ships along the way in a very short amount of time. In December of 1716, off Guadeloupe, Black Sam captured the ship *Sultana*, made her his new flagship, and installed his second-in-command Williams as captain of the *Marianne*. In February of 1717, somewhere between Cuba and Haiti, the pirates spotted a new, 300-ton slave galley and chased it for three days before finally taking her without a fight. Her name was *Whydah*, and she was on the homeward journey after just having exchanged her cargo of slaves for what again had to be Spanish coins from the 1715 Fleet. Bellamy and his men counted the treasure on board—20,000 to 30,000 pounds sterling in value—and divided it into 180 shares, one for each of the 180 pirates in the crew. Also divided were bags of gold from Africa, including gold dust and Akan gold jewelry, and reportedly East Indian jewelry as well. With all this treasure, and considering her newness and agility, Bellamy decided to make *Whydah* his new flagship and container for all the pirate loot, amounting to some four-and-a-half tons of silver and gold divided into 180 shares, not to mention other goods and an arsenal of cannons. In return for not resisting, Bellamy graciously allowed the former captain of the *Whydah* to sail away on the *Sultana*, leaving Bellamy and his pirates with just the *Whydah* and the *Marianne*.

For whatever reason—be it the needs of a New England carpenter to return to his family, or the objective of starting a new “pirate kingdom,” or simply to make repairs, Bellamy steered the *Whydah* and *Marianne* up the east coast and northward to the faraway shores of Maine. Even though each of his 180 pirates now had more wealth to his name than a typical lifetime of earnings for an honest man of that age, the captures did not stop, and the convoy added two more ships, the *Mary Anne*, which provided the gleeful pirates with a cargo of fine Madeira wine, and the small sloop *Fisher*, which gave them the benefit of a local navigator in the foggy and treacherous waters of the northeast (the fate of the *Marianne* at this point is unknown). Drunk from the wine and feeling confident in his ability to safely navigate, Bellamy made his Fateful Decision #4, which would be his last: The ships steered toward Cape Cod.

The historical record does not specify that Bellamy intended to stop at Provincetown at the northern tip of the Cape, but the fact is that he turned his ships that way when he should have turned more to the east if he was still headed to Maine. Romantics believe the reason for the return to Cape Cod—ignoring the risks of capture and prosecution—was a woman. Her name was Maria Hallett. Sam Bellamy met her by accident just before he left for the Florida coast in 1715, and the two fell in love immediately. Upon his departure, Bellamy told her he would return with vast treasures, marry her and start a new life with her as prince and princess of some island in the West Indies. Some even say she was pregnant when he left, and bore Bellamy’s son in his absence, only to have that son die under mysterious circumstances, all without Bellamy’s knowledge. It is hard to see Bellamy’s navigation toward Cape Cod on that fateful April night—and indeed the entire northward trek—as less than an attempt to see his beloved. Naturally the story continues with Hallett watching from the shore as the *Whydah* went down, and of course pining for Bellamy forever after. But as with any good love story, the facts have commingled with fictitious romance, and we will probably never know the truth behind Bellamy’s final fateful decision to steer toward Cape Cod and lose everything. (continued ->)

What Bellamy did not know, however, was that a storm was bearing down on the three ships and soon would wreck them all in the shallow sands off Cape Cod. For various reasons, most of the pirates and their captured artisans survived from the other ships, but only two aboard the *Whydah* lived to tell their tale. The pirates were soon captured and tried for piracy. These trials, in fact, provide many details about Bellamy and the *Whydah* that we would not know otherwise. In the end, each of the condemned pirates was goaded into penitence by the famous Puritan minister Cotton Mather before execution. Whether dying on the wreck or on the gallows, each pirate missed out on the general pardon of 1718 by just a few months.

The next famous figure in this story is Captain Cyprian Southack, the Boston official responsible for retrieving as much of the wreckage as possible. By his account, the *Whydah* lay in 13 feet of water just 500 feet from shore—but the cold water and poor conditions made it impossible to dive the wreck, not to mention the fact that the ship had capsized and sank into the sand upside-down, with all the treasure therefore buried deep below the ballast and cannons and everything else. His efforts to recover washed-ashore parts of the ship were rebuffed by the beachcombing locals, and he even got stuck with the bill for burying all the dead pirates.

But Southack was an expert cartographer, and it was his data that made it possible for the *Whydah* to be found in modern times by Barry Clifford, whose sleuthing pinpointed the wreck site at more like 20 feet of depth an additional 1000 from the coast, due to erosion and rising sea levels that had even sunk a nearby town that Southack had used for reference. Clifford’s efforts were roundly criticized by the archeological community until his team recovered a large bronze bell with the actual name of the ship on it. Since then, Clifford and his team have recovered 48 cannons (plus twelve more still on site) and literally tons of treasure, including around 15,000 silver coins and hundreds of small pieces of Akan gold, with hundreds more still encased in yet-to-be conserved concretions—but the “mother lode” at the bottom has yet to be reached.

It is staggering to think of what riches from the 1715 fleet are yet to be found on the *Whydah*—intriguingly, there are gaps in dates and types of coins recovered from the 1715 Fleet in modern times that the *Whydah* instead could account for. Already we have seen among the *Whydah* recoveries many silver coins from the mints of Lima and Potosi that are scarcely represented in the 1715-Fleet finds of modern times. In gold coins from the *Whydah* we might expect to see Lima gold cobs of the year 1714, which are rare from the 1715 Fleet (not to mention the controversial date 1715, which may or may not have been possible from the 1715 Fleet for Lima). Most tantalizing of all are the hundreds of Mexican gold “Royals” (round presentation pieces) that are mentioned in contemporary documents but that exist only in small numbers so far from the 1715 Fleet recoveries. Barry Clifford and his company continue to search and salvage the *Whydah* site. When—not if—they find the “mother lode,” it will be a new day for the collectors and researchers of 1715-Fleet coins!

